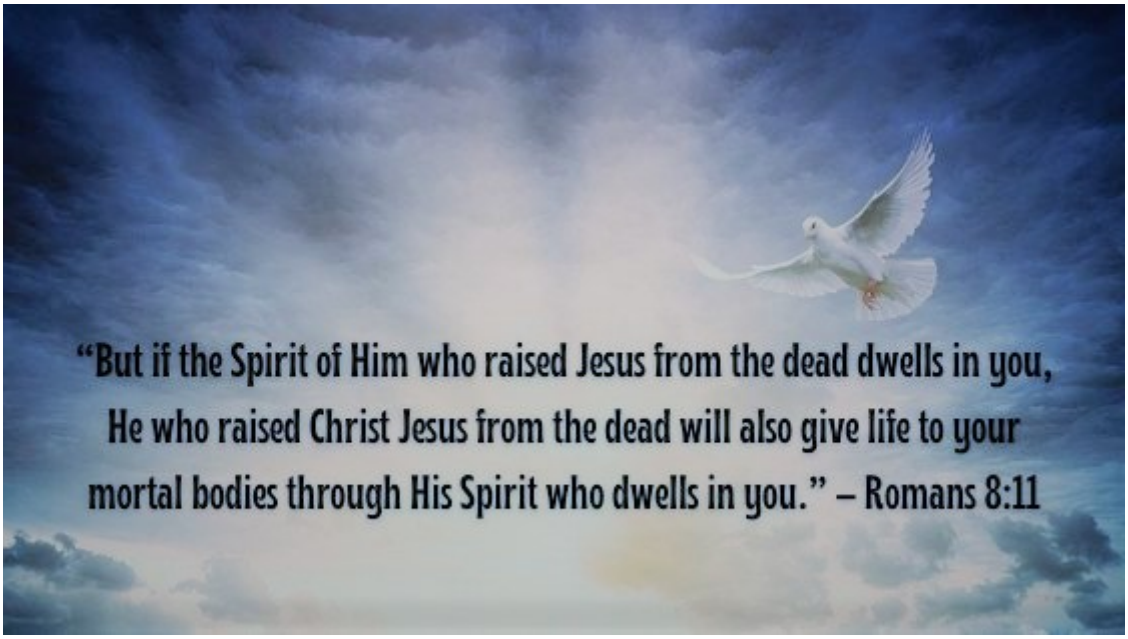
Who is the Restrainer in 2 Thessalonians 2? - Biblical Christianity

2 Thessalonians 2 describes the revelation of “the man of sin,” who is believed to be the Antichrist. Paul tells us some of the things he will do, but he says that for now, his identity remains secret until the restrainer is taken out of the way.

But who or what is the restrainer mentioned by the apostle in verses 6 and 7 that is holding back the man of sin from being revealed?

Bible Verse: 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7

“And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.”


“But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,
He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your
mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” – Romans 8:11

The Identity of the Restrainer

We know that God is at work restraining evil in general. But the exact identity of the restrainer has baffled expositors with multiple solutions offered. Paul must have told the church at Thessalonica who the restrainer was. He says, “And now

you know what is restraining…" (2 Thessalonians 2:6).

However, he does not tell us in this or any other of his letters. What he tells us is that the restrainer is at work until He is taken out of the way (2 Thessalonians 2:7b).

So, who is this person, or what kind of entity is it that is restraining the appearance of the Antichrist?

Down through the centuries many candidates have been suggested:

- The Roman Empire
- The Jewish State
- The Apostle Paul
- The Preaching of the Gospel
- Human Government
- Satan
- Elijah
- An Unknown Heavenly Being
- Michael the Archangel
- The Holy Spirit
- The Church

Clues to the Identity of the Restrainer

Saint Augustine was transparent when he confessed not knowing who the restrainer is. But several clues can help us identify the "one who is holding back."

First, the restrainer holds back the man of sin. Second, the restrainer is referred to with both neuter and masculine verbs (participles). The phrase "what is restraining" uses a neuter verb, suggesting a principle. The phrase "He who now restrains" uses a masculine verb, suggesting a person.

Third, whatever the restrainer is, he or it must be removable. Last, the restrainer must be powerful to hold back the outbreak of evil under the Antichrist.

These four clues permit only one satisfactory identification for the restrainer – God Himself. In this case, it is God the Holy Spirit who is the restrainer. But that still leaves some loose ends. Why is the Holy Spirit referred to as both a principle and as a person – like a what and a who?

And how can the Holy Spirit, who is omnipresent, be removed from the earth? These are legitimate questions. The Holy Spirit is omnipresent and cannot be removed from the earth.

Moreover, millions of people will be saved during the Tribulation (Revelation 7:9-14). The convicting, drawing, and regenerating ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential for anyone to be saved both now and in the Tribulation. (See John 3:5; 16:7-11; 1 Corinthians 12:3.)

So, how can the Holy Spirit be the restrainer? The answer is that the Holy Spirit is at work during this age in and through the church.

The Spirit-Indwelt Church

There are four key reasons for identifying the restrainer to be the church indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

First, this restrainer requires omnipotent power. Second, this view adequately explains the change in gender – from neuter to masculine (2 Thessalonians 2:6-7). In Greek the word *pneuma* (Spirit) is neuter. But the Holy Spirit is also consistently referred to by the masculine pronoun He, especially in John 14–16.

Third, Scripture speaks of the Holy Spirit as restraining sin and evil in the world (Genesis 6:3) and the heart of the believer (Galatians 5:16-17). Finally, the Holy Spirit uses the church and its proclamation and portrayal of the gospel as the primary instrument in this age to restrain evil.

We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). We are the temple of the Holy Spirit both individually and corporately (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19; Ephesians 2:21-22).

The restrainer then is the work of the Holy Spirit through His people in this present age. Amazingly, our present age is described as the age of restraint. The presence of believers in the world exerts a powerful influence upon the wicked world.

Worship with the City Harvest Church with their song "Come Holy Spirit."

The Removal of the Restrainer

The Rapture will change everything. When the rapture occurs, the Spirit-indwelt church and its restraining influence will be removed. That will release the world to sin as it never has before.

Christians who stand for civic righteousness and law and order will no longer be presently exerting their influence. The church's salt and light will be extracted from the earth. For a time at least, only unsaved people will hold government office. Satan will be able to put his plan into full swing by bringing his man onto center stage to take control of the world.

Evil will erupt and expand unchecked beyond anything known in the history of man. It will be like the removal of a huge dam. The world will be inundated with the evil of unimaginable scope and severity.

However, the Holy Spirit's return to heaven will not be a complete withdrawal from the earth, but a reverse Pentecost of sorts. His activity will be like it was in the Old Testament.

Donald Grey Barnhouse says this:

"During the Great Tribulation, the Holy Spirit will still be here on earth, of course! How can you get rid of God? But He will not be indwelling believers as He does now. Rather, He will revert to His Old Testament ministry of coming upon special people."

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit (that indwells the believers) is hindering, standing in the way, and restraining the powers of evil. Until He is taken out of the way, and immediately the man of sin (the lawless one) then shall be revealed.

As soon as the church is removed from this world, there will be no more restraining forces against evil. As a result, the man of sin will take over using the powers that will be given to him by Satan. The world will be plunged into darkness such as the world has never seen before, or will ever see again.

The forces of darkness are at work now. But the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church is keeping Satan from taking absolute control over all the earth.

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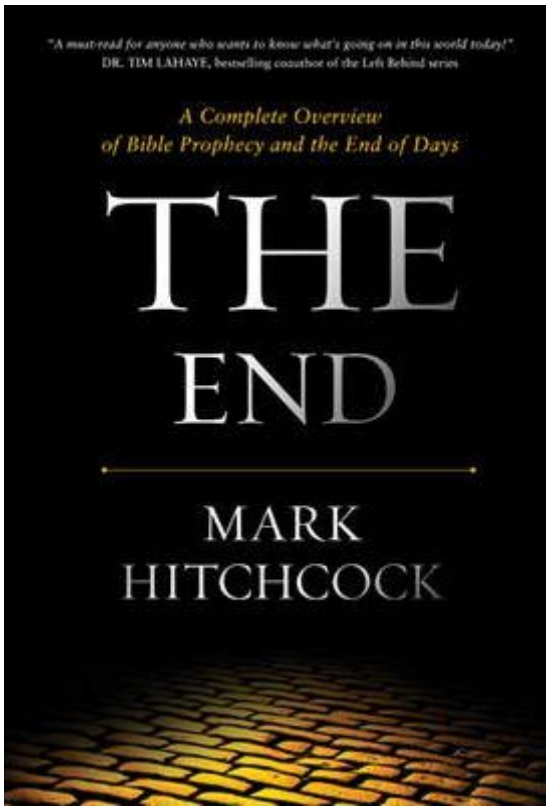
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Reference: The End, A Complete Overview of Bible Prophecy and the End of Days by Mark Hitchcock.

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